

TOWN OF WEST HARTFORD - PUBLIC HEARING
FISCAL YEAR BUDGET 2014-2015
APRIL 10, 2014
6:00 pm

Councilor Cantor: Okay. I'm gonna open the public hearing, fiscal year budget 2014-2015 as proposed by the town manager and superintendent of schools.

Present were Councilors Chris Barnes, Shari Cantor, Harry Captain, Leon Davidoff, Burke Doar, Denise Hall, Clare Kindall. Scott Slifka and Judy Casperson were absent.

Councilor Cantor: Thank you. First speaker that has signed up is Othman Niciri. Please remember to state your name and address for the record. And you have three minutes to speak. Othman Niciri? Okay. Robert J. Milne.

Robert Milne: Robert J. Milne, 3 Osage Road. With regard to the last budget hearing, the mayor did state that – in response to a question posed to the council...

Councilor Cantor: I don't think your light's on.

Robert Milne: It's on. I don't think you're listening. That with regard to a question that was posed by a member of the audience that stood up here and presented their comments and concerns, the mayor said "it would respond offline." I asked a question and I have not ever been responded to nor – with regard to the question last budget during the same session on which the mayor had represented to another person that there would be an offline response. I have never received a response nor did I receive a response to the last question. And that question I'll repeat. In the paper, I'll hold it up, top 10 taxpayers are listed. When you add up all the tax contributions, it comes up to 284 million dollars. The budget is being submitted for 252 million dollars. The excess, the 32 million over the 252 million, my question is what's going on? I know you people censure this stuff. It's in the article. It's right here. You can add 'em up. You have a little adding machine if you want to take a look at it – 284 million and our budget 252. If you do the math, tax payers should be getting a refund. And any other than these ten taxpayers, shouldn't be paying tax at all. So there's obviously some huge discrepancy. Imagine for a moment that this town, at 252 million dollars, was a private corporation or a public corporation. Could you imagine this council being members – stockholders and board of directors – and if you can imagine sitting at a budget process with regard to reporting on financial matters, looking for 32 million dollars? How long do you think this board would last in the private sector? You wouldn't last. You wouldn't last at all. But we come here, we go through this process, and it's the same process. The town does not observe comprehensive and contemporary accounting methodology as compared to the private sector. The method of accounting you incur anticipated expenses, not just those expenses that are just contractually obligated. You can actually move expenses in two years based upon the appropriation of something. You can move things. You have the ultimate benefit of deferring revenue because it's – the revenue stream is totally

ignored. There is no relationship. In the accounting world, the accountants speak of something called the matching principle. You try to associate an expenditure with that which directly has an effect upon the revenue for which is being produced. And here, you completely ignore revenue. It doesn't exist. You just take the budget, you divide it by a grand list. You bill it July 1st. Using...

Councilor Cantor: Thank you, Mr. Milne. Your time is up.

Robert Milne: ...a grand list budget nine months old.

Councilor Cantor: Thank you.

Robert Milne: Come on people. Corporate America wouldn't put up with this.

Councilor Cantor: Ms. DiNapoli?

Linda DiNapoli: Linda DiNapoli, 214 Mohegan Drive. First let me say that I agree with everything that Mr. Milne said. Obviously something is very seriously wrong here. We have a town hall that is functioning so poorly that it's laughable. We have been before this council for six years indicating all of the problems in almost every single town. We have – department. Excuse me. We have met with one of the town councilors who's in charge of the assessment department and unfortunately, that has not been straightened out. That is where one of the biggest problems is. Then when it comes to revenue, we're not collecting it. We do a wonderful job of billing people. So all those people who have jobs in the town that bill for the police department tickets, for the variance problems, for the trucks and driveways between, I might say, what is that now? 2:00 and 5:00 a.m. as a result of my having complained about that. I've had to stay up in the middle of the night just to prove my point. You people need to do something. You can't just sit here and listen. I have lived in five or six states. I have been politics in all of these states in terms of public comment. And I have never been in a state that just is a recipient of information but never supplies any answers. And yes, the mayor is now on record of saying he would supply an answer to a citizen. I am a citizen and I want answers. And if he doesn't do it and none of the rest of you have the guts to call Mr. Milne or I to give us an answer, you should be ashamed of yourself and you should all resign. This is what happens when you just keep rubber stamping a council year after year after year, folks. They're just willy-nilly, doing whatever they want because nobody's keeping an eye on them. We suggested forensic audits and audits in all sorts of things. They don't allow anything to go forward. So unless you people start getting involved, picket in front of the town hall and show up here – I can understand why you're not here because they publicize it so poorly that you need a magnifying glass to even read it and/or find it. So if you don't get out and get on top of this, you might want to consider your other options and there are many in the State of Connecticut.

Councilor Cantor: Next speaker, Sandra Brook.

Sandra Brook: My name is Sandra Brook. I live at 32 Winchester Drive and I have lived here since 1969. Every year that I have lived in my house, we've had phenomenal tax increases. My first point is that there is a proposed budget of 4.16 by our town council which is much too high for most of the people of West Hartford. Yet according to the board of ed, we have a decreasing student population. No let's see. Less students means higher taxes. Maybe my arithmetic is wrong. On the town council side, when someone retires with full benefits, why is he or she often hired back part time after their past job has been fulfilled and awarded to somebody replacing them? Thank you.

Councilor Cantor: Thank you. Next speaker, George Kennedy. Mr. Kennedy, I think you have five minutes if you're speaking on behalf of the taxpayer's association.

George Kennedy: Seeing as I'm almost deaf, I don't know what you said.

Councilor Cantor: I said you have three minutes unless you're speaking for the West Hartford Taxpayers Association.

George Kennedy: I'm speaking for the West Hartford Taxpayers Association.

Councilor Cantor: Okay, five minutes.

George Kennedy: Well we start off with the usual good evening. It's not quite what I feel. My name is George Kennedy. I live at 19 Waterside Lane. I have lived in West Hartford since 1951 so I've been through a few of these budget hearings. Over the years, I've often heard the comment that US voters get exactly what they deserve. And the attendance here reflects this. Sixty-two thousand citizens and this is what you got. You either get the people that are angry or hopefully, like myself, the people who are trying to be helpful but you don't get a representative group to hear what you got. This hearing should be packed and it should be in the auditorium because you need the seating but that's not the case. On the other hand, this hearing should have been advertised several times in the paper. If it was, I didn't see it. You have no problem using robocalls when you want to get our attention. This is a matter of good government. Robocalls would be in order to get people to come to these hearings. People out there are just apathetic. They fear you're gonna do anything you want so they don't come. They're all over in the center spending money, though. I know this sounds boring. The meeting should also not be at 2:00 p.m. and 6:00 p.m. People don't get home and eat and clean up or anything else till about 7:00. They should be then and there should be not just two, although that's probably statutory and you're gonna follow the letter of the law. There should be three or four. You really want to get some feedback. You, the town council, were elected to lead our town and represent all of West Hartford, 62,000 citizens, not just the ones with kids in our school. This budget is exactly why there is a growing generational divide in this town and this country. If you don't reduce this budget, then you are actively promoting generational conflict. And you finally made me very cynical. I now have come to believe that you count on voter apathy to alleviate you from having to make hard budget reduction decisions so you can always look like the good guys and get

continually reelected. A good example of good-guy politicians –doing what people want rather than what’s best for them and a sound management – would be the socialist victories in France, Greece, Italy. Look at the results! How about Detroit or California? They’re going bank – or California towns are going bankrupt cause local politicians couldn’t say no to requests for a budget. Between union contracts, pensions, and educational expenses, we are hemorrhaging as a country and a town. Services are down but salaries, benefits, and positions are up. We have kids – reduced number of kids but we have more teachers. The property tax was never designed to support these large budgets and this style of management. And unfortunately, once again, I refer to a very smart man, I believe, and I’m not being sarcastic. Mr. Davidoff said the system is broken. He did this a couple of years ago. He has a habit of saying the wrong thing at the right time. He’s right. It is broken and you gotta fix it. Keep raising taxes and you will tax the seniors and empty-nesters right out of town. When and if that happens, the overall demographic will radically change and you will have contributed to the economic demise of a beloved town. Seniors and empty-nesters, we pay the majority of taxes but use the minority of the services. You need us. You don’t need more kids – families with kids. You need to reduce this budget by one-and-a-half to two million dollars. Since you apparently refuse to set goals and caps on spending as a normal good budgeting procedure at the beginning of the budget process, now you are faced with cutting it after the fact. And state law conveniently prevents you from reducing or removing any individual budget line item. So now you can only lop off at the bottom or are we going to hear the classic governmental response – our hands are tied. Am I disappointed in your actions thus far? Yes. And am I starting to get angry about this? Yes. I’ve lived in this town too long to see it go down the tube because of poor management. Just tell the board of education – lop off a million-and-a-half. On the town side, the rest. And tell ‘em to figure out how to spread the reduction. Don’t worry, they’ll do it. Do you think for a minute with a budget of a quarter of a billion dollars, a 1% reduction is gonna really affect anything? It will taxes and it’d be a show of good faith and leadership on your part. You can’t lead unless the people being led understand. You set the rules and you got the budget strings. Thank you.

Councilor Cantor: Thank you, Mr. Kennedy. Next speaker, Paul Connery.

Paul Connery: Hello. First of all I want to express my gratitude to...

Councilor Cantor: Name and address, please?

Paul Connery: Oh, I’m sorry. Paul Connery from 19 Woodpond Road. I want to express my gratitude to you all and the board of ed and the staff, especially Ron and Peter and Rick Ledwith and all of our employees. First of all, you all work very hard and I appreciate that. We’re fortunate to live in such a wonderful place and to have dedicated people like yourselves. And I also want to congratulate the town based on Moody’s and S&P’s triple-A rating. That’s pretty darn good. I don’t know what our mill rate should be frankly. That’s up to you in the end. I can throw out numbers but I’m not really the expert. You are and the staff that we have and Ron’s leadership and Tom Moore. We need them to be the ones to set the targets. I don’t think the increases are realistic. I think that there are challenges obviously. We have payrolls that we

can't control necessarily because of contracts. We have pension challenges. We have healthcare challenges. So I think it's challenging for everyone to set the right target. And I do think that intuition comes in. You say oh, it should be under 3% – if you look at other towns. I'm not really sure what it is. I've looked at the budget – extremely complicated and I'm not really sure where the numbers should get cut. I look at operating expenses, though, which is one area I think you should look at and I do believe you people should set targets, like George said. We shouldn't be going over inflationary rates. Three percent should be the max as far as operating expenses. The board of ed budget went up 3.6%. Now, it's not a lot of money but 50 thousand dollars here, 50 thousand dollars there, it adds up. I also want to just mention about the fund balance. It's 19 million dollars. This is the sixth out of seven years where we have a surplus. Let's see how we can do this a little more accurately. We create this budget. Our taxes are calculated but yet we have money coming back. I know that's not a bad thing, especially with the board sending us back money – that's wonderful. But can we figure out something with this undesignated fund balance? Our target is 7%. We've been over that every year since 2005. So we need to figure out – is there some way we can use that more effectively? It's cash. We can – is there something we can do there? We got about a million-and-a-half dollars that we can work with. Tell the board of education no, you can't fund it and if they need more money, they'll come back to you. And give 'em it if they need it – if there's rationale for it. If they want to get something additionally appropriated, I think there's rules they can do that, right? I think there is. Maybe I'm wrong. There isn't? Well, there should be because I can't stand it when they put all these positions in place and then at the end of the year, we have a surplus.

Councilor Cantor: Thank you, Mr. Connery. Your time is up.

Paul Connery: Thank you very much.

Councilor Cantor: Next speaker, Bruce Grower.

Bruce Grower: Hi. My name is Bruce Grower. I live at 217 South Highland Street. That's an apartment. Right now, I'm renting that with my partner and we're presently looking for a house. Our first choice would be West Hartford but with the really high taxes, we're checking out Farmington and Newington because the taxes are just so much higher in West Hartford than in the surrounding communities. Actually, you could just take a look around the pond around Tunxis and the Farmington side is so much less than the West Hartford side which seems basically almost unbelievable. I just spoke to someone a little while ago and they told me they sold a house to somebody and they're paying 25 thousand dollars a year in taxes. Let's see. As far as the budget goes, for the pension costs to go up 11% in one year, that's way above the rate of inflation. And education costs going up nearly 5%, that's also way above inflation. In today's environment, why can't we just basically put the budget at a 0% increase and then just try to make cuts for what we have and try to live within our means? Also, to me, it seems like it's wasteful spending when you put up new curbs and you put these islands in different streets where it's more difficult for the plows to plow in the wintertime and then you end up getting a lot more potholes. Every year, you have to basically repair the asphalt when if you made a

higher initial investment in cement, then you wouldn't have to do all of these maintenance costs. Whenever you see a parking garage, they never make it out of asphalt. They always use cement. Also, I think the taxes should have been going down because of Blue Back Square. Before, that was all grassy area right around the library. With all these new businesses, you would think that the idea behind getting Blue Back Square would be to decrease taxes, not increase taxes. Yeah, also in addition to that, I mean we are definitely in a recessionary period and right now, we have bubbles in the stock market and the housing market and once these bubbles either pop or deflate, there's going to be more and more people that are going to be out of work. And a lot of these same businesses in Blue Back Square and other businesses around West Hartford are gonna end up folding. So there's even gonna be less revenue available. So we really do need to live within our means. I mean, right now, it just seems totally ridiculous that taxes are going up when you end up getting all these other businesses. And then also the gentleman, what's your first name again? Bob, I mean I can't even imagine a 32 million dollar discrepancy. I mean it just kind of like blows my mind. I mean who is the person that is doing the accounting? Actually this should really be front-page news in like the Courant and all other things and you guys should give us a more accurate budget. That way, you can plan ahead.

Councilor Cantor: Thank you, Mr. Grower. Your time is up. Gary Muldoon?

Gary Muldoon: Yes. Gary Muldoon, 94 Ledgewood Road. I'm here again and after last year, there was a nice article written by Kathleen Schassler about finally something that wasn't like a smiley face about West Hartford. Everything is great in West Hartford. Finally she wrote an article about how people are kind of stressed out about the taxes. And she followed it up with the massive overtime that was in work – one police officer made 80 thousand dollars in overtime and one fireman made 60 thousand dollars in overtime. That's unacceptable to me. I don't think that's fair. And this contract we just had. They made it sound in the paper like it's a big success. Two years and we had to be brought to binding arbitration? That's ridiculous. Now, I know that's just the way the laws are but we gave – and the contract started out – the mayor said this is a contract everybody else has signed off so you think it would have been a done deal. But no, it took two years and binding arbitration. Now I guess you can't expect people to give up something – they want to fight for it – they're not gonna give it up. But we gave them the weapons to fight off this thing. We gave them the weapons. We should change that. This town council, our state representatives should be working so we don't have to go through this stuff because to me, I think that was a failed negotiations. And we can't do that. Today, we found out that New Britain just raised their taxes 11% because they haven't been dealing with things in a proper manner. They should have been getting – had contracts – and we've done the same thing. We waited too long. The mayor said in 2001 hey, that's the first year we started refunding the pension fund. Yeah, but that's the first year we found out that the stock market went down – we should have been really – started our negotiations then. But here we are – too late – grandfathered everybody in and now we're gonna be stuck with a high bill for years. And so today, this budget – we should have worked on this budget more and I think this budget should be brought back and worked on even more because I think – I'm reading about the school. They're still adding positions. Like you said, the school population is dropping, we're gonna add

positions? I don't get it. Like I said, I think we've got a lot more work to do and I think we can start on this budget. Take this budget back and rework it and like I said, there's more to do as far as our pensions and things like that, too. And I don't think we should have to go through two-year negotiations with anybody here. And I'm a union person myself. People go well who's this guy? I'm just a union – and we were exposed to all kinds of stuff – radiation. I've been exposed to all kinds of radiation and asbestos. Half my local died from asbestos and we couldn't say hey, this is dangerous stuff. We should get paid more. Only in the public can we do stuff like that – with public money can we do stuff like that. You know? So I want to be fair to everybody but I want to be fair to me as a taxpayer, too. Should we be paying people 175 days – sick days on retirement? No! That should never have been grandfathered in. And after two years, that's what we get? Like I said, it's ridiculous. But again, I think this budget should be brought back, worked on – like I said, show some good faith.

Councilor Cantor: Thank you, Mr. Muldoon. Your time is up.

Gary Muldoon: Okay.

Councilor Cantor: Is there anyone else that would like to speak that did not sign up on the subject of this public hearing which is regarding the budget? Yes, step up.

Elliot Check: Good evening. It's been a while. Elliot Check, 1061 Farmington Avenue. Originally, I wasn't planning on saying anything tonight but I figured what the hell? My two cents is as good as anybody's. Some of you think I've moved. We're still here but we have one foot out of the state. My wife and I are retired. My son was just looking for a condo. He looked in West Hartford. He liked West Hartford Center. He bought in Newington. Better value. Newer construction. Better taxes. He looked right here near our house. Looking at 70-/80-year old housing. Taxes ridiculous and hey, if he drinks too much, he can crash at our house. One of the board of ed members – we both – we all know – Claire and I know anyway – packed up and moved to Farmington because of the taxes in this town. The taxes on our place in Ashville run 26 hundred a year for a house valued about the same as our house here where we pay 11 thousand. Property taxes down there on cars are a fraction of what they are up here. You can keep taking it up. Do what you want. I enjoy walking the town. I enjoy walking Ashville, okay? It's a great place. Great community. Both are. But you can only charge people so much before they say screw it, I'm outta here. Thank you.

Councilor Cantor: Okay, Mr. Check. Anybody else who would like to speak to this – okay. I'm gonna close – oh, sorry. Come on up.

Anne Miller: Hi everyone. Anne Miller, 28 Westmoreland Drive. This is actually my husband and I's first council and I just wanted to say thank you for the opportunity to speak. Just – the only thing I have to really say is more on the property tax. My husband and I bought our house about three years ago. We looked for a home in West Hartford specifically for over three years after we got married. We rented on Farmington Avenue and it was our dream to live in West

Hartford. We wanted to raise our family here. We still hope to be able to do that. Unlike many other maybe mid-30 people like my husband and I, we don't have any debt. I saved my entire life to be able to buy a house in West Hartford and we're looking at a problem because we won't be able to afford it. Our taxes have gone up two thousand dollars in three years and we are being pushed out. And our dream of being able to live in West Hartford and raise a family is really not gonna happen if this continues. So I really hope – I speak for people in their mid-30s who really have a dream of raising a family here because it's a beautiful community and I really hope you guys do the right thing and take a strong look at the budget and not increase our taxes any more because it's gonna drive middle-class people out. Thank you.

Councilor Cantor: Thank you.

Councilor Cantor: Anyone else? Okay. I'm going to close this public hearing.

Essie S. Labrot

Town Clerk/Council Clerk

ESL/kc